

Statement of Mr. Ronald Medford  
Senior Associate Administrator for Vehicle Safety  
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration  
*before the*  
Senate Consumer Affairs, Insurance and Automotive Safety Subcommittee  
*regarding*  
Vehicle Safety and Children

February 28, 2007

Mr. Chairman, my name is Ron Medford, and I am the senior associate administrator for vehicle safety at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this subcommittee to discuss the important issue of improving vehicle safety for children. NHTSA Administrator Nicole R. Nason sends her regrets that she could not appear before you today because of a prior commitment to testify at a House subcommittee hearing.

The mission of NHTSA is to reduce fatalities and injuries on our Nation's roads. In 2005, the last year for which complete data is available, there were 43,443 highway-related fatalities and 2.7 million injuries. Vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among the age group from 4 to 34.

While every highway-related death is a tragedy, the loss of a child is particularly devastating.

Administrator Nason has made protecting children one of her top priorities. Earlier this month, Administrator Nason hosted a public meeting with industry leaders and consumer advocates to discuss ways to increase the use of Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children, or the LATCH system. LATCH is a system of anchors built into newer vehicles that is specifically designed to make it easier to properly install child seats. This meeting came about as a result of a new survey conducted by NHTSA which found that 40 percent of parents with LATCH-equipped vehicles still rely on seat belts to secure their car seat. The survey also found that many parents were unaware of either the existence or the importance of the LATCH system.

As a result of this meeting, NHTSA is working with vehicle and car seat manufacturers, child seat installation instructors, and consumer advocates to develop a national education campaign for parents to better inform them on proper car seat installation. Installing a child safety seat should not be a daunting task for parents, and NHTSA is committed to making LATCH better known and easier to use.

Additionally, NHTSA is currently working to revise its ease-of-use ratings for car seats. We believe this new rating system will serve as a strong incentive for car seat manufacturers to make proper installation of car seats easier for parents.

Another area of concern that NHTSA is active in addressing is backover crashes. Last November, NHTSA released a comprehensive study on this issue. This study estimated that backover crashes cause at least 183 fatalities, and up to 7,419 injuries annually. Thankfully the

majority of these injuries are relatively minor, meaning that the victims are treated in an emergency room and released.

As part of this study, NHTSA tested several systems currently available to evaluate their performance and potential effectiveness in mitigating backover crashes. Our tests found that the performance of ultrasonic and radar parking aids in detecting children behind the vehicle was typically poor.

Our study also looked at camera-based systems and found that they provide drivers with the ability to see pedestrians in the majority of rear blind spot zones. However, we found that rain, fog or glare from the sun can significantly reduce the camera's ability to show drivers a clear view of an object in back of the vehicle. The cameras are also not effective at night. Finally, our research showed that even if the camera can clearly discern the object, preventing the crash is still dependent on the driver observing the video display and reacting quickly enough.

Although our study showed that cameras have limitations in preventing backover crashes, NHTSA believes this technology holds promise. Accordingly, we are continuing our research in this area.

Regarding the entrapment hazard posed by power windows, the Subcommittee may recall that in April 2004, NHTSA finalized a rule mandating that all vehicles sold in MY 2008 have recessed window switches to prevent their inadvertent activation. Last year, NHTSA added to this rule per a mandate in SAFETEA-LU requiring that power window switches not only be recessed, but have to be pulled "up and out" to work. We were pleased to be able to meet this mandate nearly a year ahead of the deadline set by Congress. Although a child fatality due to a power window is mercifully an extremely rare occurrence (approximately one to two children a year on average) we believe that once in effect, these rules will significantly reduce the likelihood of these incidents.

Mr. Chairman, it is the worst fear of every parent to lose a child. The good news is child safety has come a long way. A generation ago it was not uncommon for children of all ages to be sitting anywhere in the car, completely unrestrained. Through our educational efforts, and the passage of Anton's Law and other similar legislation, now 98 percent of children under one year old are buckled up.

More important, these changes in law presaged a change in society towards child safety in vehicles. Apart from being illegal in all 50 states, most parents now would never consider not buckling up their child.

Mr. Chairman, even though individuals nine years of age and under have the least amount of fatalities among any age group, we are committed to making additional safety improvements to further protect children. Of all the lifesaving work NHTSA does, I consider this our most important duty.

Thank you for your consideration, and for this Subcommittee's ongoing effort to improve highway safety. I would be pleased to answer any questions.